

# **Sculpting Students' Skills**

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## **Introduction**

*The Nest, Red is Coming* and *Heavy Paint*, starting from their more or less abstract names, sculptures can serve as a wonderful source for language education. This text introduces sample activities ranging from traditional language tasks based on classical statues to more creative tasks using (post-) modern sculptural art. The article also suggests that dealing with three-dimensional works of art is especially beneficial for supporting communication in language classes, as many statues, sculptures and installations were designed for public viewing and the processes of commissioning, selecting and presenting art in public spaces often have historical, ideological and even political background.

## **Background**

Like many other educational or public institutions, my university has a long tradition of collecting art. Since Masaryk University was founded in Brno in 1919, its development has been interconnected with local history as well as with history of art. A few years ago, I attended a guided tour on our new campus that was presenting both the university fascinating heritage and its up-to-date sculpture collection. As I have been always interested in including art in my language classes, the tour inspired me to start looking for ways to communicate the enormous educational and creative potential of the sculptures to my students.

## **Statues for beginners**

It was logical to start with a piece of art that all my students knew – a statue of Masaryk himself. The rather traditional statue depicting the founding figure of our university stands in front of the building where the Language Centre as well as the International Office are located. At first, my plan was neither ambitious, nor very creative. I wanted to just create an information gap activity that would give students additional practice of asking questions and that would introduce a bit of our university history. When preparing the activity, I soon realized that there was much more to ask and discuss than just: „Who created the statue? “ versus „When did Makovský create the statue? “

Masaryk University was effected by many turbulent events in the 20th century. It was closed during the Nazi occupation era and only some faculties were reopened after the communist party took over the power in 1948. The university lost its original name in 1960 and it was restructured and renamed again in 1990. It seemed to be almost impossible to share all those historical peculiarities with the students in an interesting way. However, by choosing and using photos of the related statues, I was able to create an activity that was informative and at the same time communicative and creative. Each student was given a selection of the historical facts and a photo. In groups, they were asked to share the information and create a visual timeline of the 20th century. The photos included: a bust of Masaryk designed by Makovský for the university in 1919; the remains of a gigantic statue of the president that was designed by an amateur sculptor in 1928 and that was destroyed during the second World War; Makovský's Victory Monument of the Red Army executed in the style of social realism; and two different copies of the Masaryk statue by Makovský - the original from 1939 and its recast from 1992. The timeline task proved to be very engaging for students; their need for information and opinion exchange resulted in a lot of authentic communication as well as in creating original posters.

The activity suggested that statues and sculptures provide an accessible way to interpret the history of a place and its people. In language education, photos of such artworks create a possibility to include culture of the language or students' cultures into class. The art related visuals were described by Gerngross, Puchta and Rinvoluceri (2007: 42) as "being inexpensive, being available in most situations, being personal and bringing images of reality into the unnatural world of language classroom." I successfully used all those advantages for teaching a speaking activity based on iconic statues (sculptures) in mixed groups of students from various nationalities. The students were required to present one piece of public art that has special significance for their country. The Statue of Liberty served as an example of iconic artwork in the United States. I was using a computer with internet connection and a projector to find the corresponding photos and show them to students. Alternatively, the students can use their own mobile devices to find and share photos. These visual activities are great introductions into discussing cultural realia. In terms of language usage, they are suitable to all levels, including beginners.

### **Statues and sculptures for intermediate**

When teaching students of higher levels, class discussions, reading or listening activities can deal with more general or sophisticated issues related to art. Based on images of statues and sculptures, the students may try to analyse and explain the historical, ideological or political background of the artworks. Having such discussions with international students showed me that it is not only in Central Europe where three-dimensional art designed for public viewing often reveals much about historical and contemporary controversies. I believe it is useful to make students aware of and sensitive to such controversies and thus to develop their intercultural competencies. According to Wright (1990: 142), it is important to ensure a supportive environment for discussing such delicate issues: "Students are encouraged to express feelings and ideas and to exchange experiences, while little or no emphasis is placed on whether these are right or wrong." According to my observations, the exchange on cultural or historical controversies may be easier when students are able to refer to concrete art objects. The statues or sculptures can become representations of rather abstract or complex concepts and can provide a safe framework for discussing even sensitive topics.

Futhermore, the processes of selecting and positioning art in public spaces can serve as a great source for language activities. It is possible to debate an existing art competition or to simulate a fictional one as a communicative task for students. In both scenarios, the students need to agree on one winning design as a group, which makes them practice their argumentation and negotiation skills. Wright (1990: 98) defines this common aim as a challenge principle of an activity: “They have a reason for speaking and for listening to other students. This simple principle of introducing a challenge can infuse all kinds of activities, making the foreign language a living and vibrant element.” Indeed, I was happy to observe extremely vivid discussions in my class when the students were asked to evaluate authentic competition entries for an equestrian statue to honor Margrave Jošt in Brno. In this respect, due to their truly public character and real presence in students’ lives, statues and sculptures represent art that everyone has a reason to discuss.

After I succesfully piloted some activities using photos of statues in class, I started to experiment with teaching the activities outside the class. At first, I designed a guided tour through the university sculpture collection for my students. The tour consisted of 10 stops, each of them presenting one sculpture and one langauge task. The tasks included traditional multiple choice activities practicing vocabulary and grammar (e.g. The sculpture is fascinating / fascinated.), a reading comprehension task (e.g. Masaryk University was renamed in 1960. T/F), an information gap speaking activity, etc. However, it was the more creative activities that proved to be especially successful in terms of students’engagement and their language production.

### **Sculptures and installations for advanced**

In the reception area of the Masaryk University campus, there seems to be a red viscous fluid flowing from an outlet and solidifying on the floor. It is a sculpture by the Czech artist Křištof Kintera. Even if not many students liked the sculpture, all of them enjoyed discussing it. The first task for the students was to think of a possible name for the abstract sculpture, then, they were invited to offer their personal interpretation of the artwork. When approaching both tasks, the students were very creative and communicative, each of them suggested their own names and most of them tried to share their interpretations. The emphasis of the activity was on activating the students’ imagination. The aim was achieved as their suggestions were more original than the author’s straightforward name *Red is Coming*.

By developing similar activites, I tried to naturally employ the students’ creativity and critical thinking for their foreign language advancement. When looking at the unusual alien-like sculptures by Lukáš Rittstein, the students were trying to figure out how the artworks were created. At the end of the activity, they successfully identified and clearly explained that both *Enlightment* and *Heavy Paint* were made of polycarbonate by pouring resin into holes in the ground. When trying to precisely describe the geometric *Reliefplastik* by Otto Herbert Hajek in a picture dictation, the students intensively practised their explanatory skills.

Picture 1: Students involved in a picture dictation activity.



In the same way, collaborative tasks and tasks allowing students' to produce their own versions of some sculptures proved to be extremely involving and rewarding. The students effectively co-designed their own top parts for a sculpture by Vladimír Preclík called *The Flowering of Learning*. The dynamic element of the guided tour was emphasized fully by an activity related to a sculpture by Dušan Jankovič. The students were to physically reproduce the bronze cut-out group of human bodies that the artist called *Balance*. The task, apart from being very entertaining, produced a surprising amount of speaking and listening practice.

Picture 2: Students creating their life sculptures.



The final task of the tour made the groups practice their argumentative skills as they had to propose and agree on a new, more suitable location for *The Nest*, a stainless steel installation by Dalibor Chatrný. The students were very persuasive in explaining that the artwork is now hanging too high in the lobby to be really appreciated and that only relocating it would make the visitors fully aware of its qualities. Also this activity proved to be a very efficient way to activate the students' language capacities by focusing on their creative and communicative potentials. My impressions about the activities' efficiency and popularity were confirmed as the guided tour received a very positive feedback from the students in both respects.

## Conclusions

The aim of this text is to share my experience with developing and teaching activities based on statues, sculptures or installations. I have observed that those activities have enormous communicative potential and by emphasizing the visual, creative (or even physical) dimension of the tasks the students are able to apply their language skills in a very natural way. The sample activities presented in this text should demonstrate various possibilities to include three dimensional artworks into language classes. Using images of statues or sculptures for traditional language tasks does not require much preparation and can easily supply a language class with an interesting cultural input.

Nevertheless, I was trying to argue that it is worth experimenting with more creative tasks, with less traditional sculptural art and with teaching outdoors. The statues and sculptures related to historical events or cultural controversies can provoke students to express their personal views and share their ideas, while still providing them a safe framework for such sensitive discussions. Similarly, debating expectations and roles related to art in public spaces develops students' critical thinking and cultural awareness. Activities related to abstract sculptures or installations can stimulate students' imaginative and critical potential, and thus contribute to a more personalized and engaging foreign language practice. In addition, I explained that the tasks grounded on students' creativity as well as tasks requiring their cooperation promote authentic communication the most. I have observed that after being involved in creative and productive activities, the students become more confident about using a foreign language. Therefore, I believe that it is extremely beneficial to use public art for sculpting students' skills.

## References

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